The 80th Anniversary of Kwasan Observatory, Kyoto University (4. 花山天文台の思い出)

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明日のことをいうと天井の鼠が笑う。
“Prediction is very difficult, especially if it’s about the future.”, Niels Bohr.

A Japanese proverb and a quote from a Danish Nobel prize winning atomic physicist. I was trained for a PhD in atomic physics applied to Solar EUV observations from the SOHO satellite, and eventually ended up pursuing Solar Physics research at Kwasan Observatory in Japan. These quotes therefore seem somehow appropriate to me, but more importantly, they express something of how I feel when I reflect on how I came to be in Japan.

If I had told myself when I graduated from University in Glasgow that I would someday be working on top of a mountain at an Observatory in Kyoto, I would probably have laughed in disbelief like the rats in the ceiling in the proverb. However, when Prof. Kurokawa offered me the possibility of coming to work at Kwasan, I could not let the once in a lifetime opportunity pass. At that time, in the summer of 2001, predicting my future would have been extremely difficult! What new cultural experiences was I about to have? How would I acclimatize to living and working in Japanese society? Would the career move and research work be a success?

With the benefit of distance I can see how my life was completely changed both personally and professionally at that time.

Personally, I think that none who has had the opportunity to experience life in another culture far from their home would disagree that it changes their outlook dramatically. Your life becomes an international life, meeting new local friends who have lived their whole lives in the culture that you are experiencing for the first time, and making new friends from other countries around the world. Since coming to Japan I have met people from Japan, China, USA, Australia, Canada, Russia, and New Zealand. The different perspectives broaden a person’s experience and understanding of other cultures. I have also had the opportunity to travel throughout Japan, and to Korea and Indonesia. This summer I will visit Singapore for the first time. I would never have had these opportunities if I had not decided to accept the chance to work at Kwasan Observatory.

私は祇園で鮎の塩焼きを食べながら、祭りを見ました。

The list of happy memories is endless, from cultural experiences such as watching Sumo in Osaka, to the Daimonji fire festival in Kyoto, to attending a wedding at the Heian shrine (with Kaiseki cuisine at the wedding party), to “normal” activities in Japan such as karaoke and beer gardens! Even apparently ordinary activities can be an adventure in a different culture. My first memory of Japan was seeing the train seats automatically reverse positions, on the Haruka express from Kansai airport to Kyoto.

Professionally, I have no doubt that I would not have reached my present position if I had not gone to Kwasan. Currently I am a resident scientist and regular Chief Observer at the Hinode operations center at ISAS near Tokyo. I work for the Naval Research Laboratory in the US, but it was working with Kurokawa-san and Shibata-san and others at Kwasan that developed my research interests. I started research as someone interested mainly in EUV spectroscopy of the solar corona, and through working at Kwasan became interested also in optical/X-ray observations and modeling of the connections and energy transfer from the photosphere to the corona, and also the primary role in energy release played by the magnetic field. This had the happy coincidence of being the main topic of investigation for the then upcoming Solar-B mission. Even more luckily, Solar-B would carry a coronal EUV spectrometer; an evolution from the one on SOHO that I worked on as a PhD student. My experience working in Japan also no doubt helped me to get the position, with a 2 year detour to Washington, DC, to await the launch.

After the launch of ひので (Solar-B for a few more hours)

There cannot be many things more nerve wracking or thrilling for a satellite team than watching its launch after years of construction, especially so if you have just moved half way around the world to start a new job that is dependent on a successful launch! That day was another unforgettable experience for me in Japan. I have attached a photo of me at the launch site where the protective fence was blown in by the rocket blast. That was the calm before the storm, as the next 3-4 months were spent working around the clock to ensure that the spectrometer worked and would produce high quality data. It was an exciting if stressful period, but Hinode is now hugely successful and thoughts are turning to the next Japanese solar mission (Solar-C) that I also hope to be involved with.

So, professionally and personally, I have developed a life long connection with Japan that I would never have expected 10 years ago. My deceased grandmother was 15 years old when Kwasan Observatory was opened, and the only time she traveled outside of Scotland was to visit London. I am eternally grateful for the opportunity I had to live in Kyoto and work at Kwasan. Such possibilities were unthinkable to my grandmother's generation, but within her lifetime her grandson had the opportunity. I wish everyone at Kwasan and Hida Observatories continued success for (at least) the next 80 years, hopefully much longer!

花山天文台の皆様、おめでとうございます。

David H. Brooks